

## Back Again, Back Again: Teeth and Claws, Part Two

Trigger Warning: This episode contains descriptions of violence, background character deaths, gore, and descriptions of self harm.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode nine: Teeth and Claws, part two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** I sat to the side as they pulled their own dead from the lot and stacked the bodies just outside the edge of the wood, in the clearing between the village and the place blood had been shed. Even I could see the message in it, hard and unshakeable, for those in the village, for all those the story would reach: *this is what happens to those who defy kings*. Wood was dragged out and the pyre lit; it wasn't long before the smell of cracking leather and burning flesh mixed with woodsmoke. The story was easy enough to see form.

Cassian came and sat beside me shortly after, done dragging bodies with the rest of the uninjured soldiers. He pushed a dagger into my lap -- it was roughly hewn, the wood that made the handle was worn smooth from time rather than polishing. *All that's left of the girl you -- disappeared*, he said, and I grimaced.

*Isn't it kind of gruesome to take a trophy? She would've killed me.*

*But you killed her,* Cassian retorted, and as I flinched, he corrected, *or -- disappeared her. So you win.* He nodded again to the dagger. *It's so you don't forget.* He pointed to my shoulder. *We'll have someone in the village set that before we ride out.* His fingers brushed over the cut on my face. I tried not to flinch at that, too, when other areas -- now wrapped, to slow the bleeding, but not cleaned or stitched or any else -- were worse.

*I'm sorry,* he said, quietly. *You shouldn't have come.*

I didn't respond. I still don't know what I would have said.

Cassian sought out the healers in the village -- of which there were two, a mother and her son, a few years younger than us -- and the two of them set to the hurt soldiers. When it was my turn, the boy gasped -- his mother shushed him before they set to work, cleaning the wound with -- honey, of all things -- before the boy put my arm back together with short, tight stitches that I tried not to flinch at.

*Gratinoc,* I told them as they finished, not knowing much else, and the boy said something that caused his mother to smack the back of his head -- but at my blank stare, he sighed and turned away, wrapping their supplies back up into cloths as they moved to the next soldier.

We rode back, exhaustion rather than excitement in the air. For the eighteen rebel bodies that had been burned we'd lost six soldiers -- of which I couldn't help but mourn, though I felt false in doing so -- I hadn't known their names, and there were true friends of them that had more right to shed tears than I did. We took the long way through the city up to the castle -- through snaking village after village, banners high,

bloodstained but victorious -- and the people watched, stone-faced. Just as before, the message was clear, what our ride meant, what our victory said: *this is what happens when you stand against a king.*

We passed through the gates, back to the castle once more, just as the sky began to darken. The queen and king, alerted earlier of our arrival home by a messenger Cassian sent ahead, stood on the platformed entryway, most of the castle's staff surrounding the road in -- at the end of which, they waited, dressed in splendor and midnight blue and gold. Cassian dismounted and they greeted their son, the queen pulling him into a hug. The words were clear on his lips, even as I hung back with the rest of the soldiers. *It is done.*

The queen gestured to me, and Cassian nodded, so I pulled myself from my horse, wincing as the stitches rubbed on my shoulder. I was disheveled and bloody -- even more so than Cassian -- and the queen noticed this, her eyes narrowing but her actions not changing as she motioned me up towards them. I climbed up the steps and, hesitantly, kneeled before them, afraid of making the wrong choice.

Cassian helped me to my feet. I turned, then, looking out to face the crowd.

*Raise your sword, child,* the queen breathed, the words sharp in her mouth.

*My arm* -- I mumbled, but the words came again, sharper.

*Your sword.*

So I pulled my sword from my belt and winced, trying not to cry as I lifted it above my head and my stitches snagged and my body screamed but as she'd wanted, as it always did, my sword began to glow, a faint gold-green that poured out from it.

This was what the crowd had wanted to see. And the reaction was palpable, a shifting in the way they stood and moved.

The queen began to speak as I lowered it and pushed it back into its sheath once more, and, my eyes blurry with tears because *shit shit that had hurt more than I'd expected*. I felt Cassian grab my hand. He squeezed, gently, once, twice, a reminder, *I'm here. I'm sorry*, as the queen went on in Rhysean and we tried to look like children of prophecy rather than just... children.

The procession disbanded. Cassian and I were in the arena, and then I was in my room, Rhia helping me peel off my clothes, her hands shaking, nervous by the amount of blood, as she took in my stitches and my decimated shoulder with a breathy *oh, Ilyaas*, the words so full of sorrow that I lost it again -- and I was crying, even though it didn't hurt nearly as bad now, but because here she was, and she cared, and sometimes tears come more easily when someone else talks about it.

She pulled me into a hug, and we collapsed onto the bed, me shaking over the people that had died, that I had almost been one of them, that I disappeared a girl to who knows where --

That I wasn't ready, that I had let everyone down, that if Cassian hadn't stopped her I would've been dead -- that I was useless in battle, for someone that was supposed to be a soldier. For someone who was prophesied to be a soldier.

Rhia held me, still, stroking my hair, and murmured, *maybe you were meant to be a king*.

I cried more. She cried too, a little bit, and laughed when I saw her tears as she said she was crying because I'd cried too much to not have to balance it out.

She put me into a bath and let me sit until the water had gone cold, even though the kings had wanted Cassian and I at dinner, then helped me into the same shirt I'd worn the first day -- the white one, that looked like Midas had touched the sleeves -- and a pair of leggings and boots. She smiled at me,

and cupped my chin in one hand, and I was filled with the worst mix of shame that you get after crying in front of someone and a love that fills you, fierce and hot, after they protect your very soul.

I pressed my forehead to hers and squeezed my eyes shut. *gratinoc*, I whispered, and *of course* fell from her lips, quiet and forgiving.

I didn't want to go downstairs to dinner. I wanted to stay with Rhia.

I sat at the high table across from Cassian, the kings at either end. I was late -- significantly -- they were well into the main course of the meal, but I bowed and didn't take any other action to excuse myself, pulling myself into my chair and looking down at the food in front of me.

Tension sat, dark and thick, among the people at the table. It wasn't long before Cassian and his mother began trading terse words in Rhysean, deliberately difficult and fast to make it impossible for me to understand. I blocked them out -- it wasn't the first time -- before Cassian set his fork down with a little too much force and said, tersely, in English -- *you shouldn't have made her come*.

The queen replied in Rhysean, her eyes suggesting murder if Cassian didn't can it.

He didn't. *She almost died*, he snapped, *because you insisted she go*.

*She's the prophecy child*, the queen said, in English, now, her words plucked with emotionless airs. *She should be able to do more*.

Silence.

*I don't think I'm hungry anymore*, Cassian said, standing. The queen snapped something, in Rhysean again, her words no longer meant for my ears.

Cassian sat back down.

The rest of dinner was in silence.

This was when I started to get that Bad Feeling in my gut. I don't mean they're-evil vibes, just that -- things weren't going to stay the same. They didn't. More on that later.

And -- that was two months in. And -- I've been back two months now. I go to sleep before midnight every day, just in case the clock'll change to a new day and I'll find myself back in Rhysea, but I haven't. I suspect I won't.

(Silence)

I shouldn't say that. Words have power. Intentions have power. I need to believe that I'll get home --

(Silence.)

I can't believe that I'm going to be stuck here forever.

(Silence.)

Back there...? I talked at some point about -- how could I tell if I was dreaming or if Rhysea and Cassian and Rhia were real? But... there... I had the same thoughts, at least for a few days. How did I know this was real? That it wasn't a long dream I was having. I said that a lot to myself, in the beginning. *I'm dreaming*. Even though the rain had felt real. *I'm dreaming*. *I'm dreaming*. But sfter a few days, where I would sleep and have different dreams and wake up and have them slide off like jell-o from a hot car, forgetting everything that I'd dreamt but this new world staying real -- I believed it. Believed *in* it. I couldn't've imagined magic that vivid. The feeling it puts in your head --

It... *hurts*, to miss it.

(Silence.)

And then, of course, getting stabbed. I'm not clever enough to dream up pain like that.

I... I even double-checked, day eight of being back. I had to know if I'd dreamed up that pain. And I mean, we have plenty of knives in the kitchen for cutting and paring and --

It's the same pain. It hurts the same way.

It wasn't a dream.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.